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Help Split the Dissidents
As U.S. Debates New Aid****Two Presidents of Nicaragua?**

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WAWA BOOM, Nicaragua — Lt. Gertrudes Rodriguez of the Sandinista army, packing only a pistol, boards a rusty ferry to cross the Wawa River into territory held by Indian rebels.

On reaching the far bank, he is greeted warily by two Indian sentries clad in the blue fatigues of the Contra guerrillas.

Lt. Rodriguez quickly breaks the tension by offering the rebels a trip to the other side of the river. "Do you want to go to Puerto Cabezas to visit your families?" he asks, referring to the Sandinista-held town 15 miles southeast of here. "If your commander gives you permission, it's fine with me."

The two say they will consider the offer another time. His goodwill mission complete, Lt. Rodriguez gets back on the ferry for the return trip.

New Friendliness

The lieutenant's offer is more than casual friendliness. It reflects a new broad-based government strategy aimed at winning back the more than 100,000 Indians who support the Contra guerrillas because of past Sandinista abuses.

After years of heavy-handed rule, the Sandinista government is making politically adept peace overtures to Indians. A top Western diplomat in Managua suggests that the overtures indicate a more-flexible policy. "They're walking up a learning curve," he says. "Just because some things are tactical doesn't mean they won't become permanent."

With the Indians, the tactics involve everything from offers of food and supplies (including guns) to ceding control of dozens of villages to Indian warriors and to talks about autonomy for their homelands here on the so-called Atlantic Coast, which actually borders the Caribbean.

Implicit in the tactics is a sharp retrenchment by the Sandinistas, who previously tried to force the Indians to follow Managua's directives. But the fiercely independent Indians turned against the government, and some 4,500 of them took up arms as guerrillas. Now, in a Sandinista effort to win them back, official policy is to leave the Indians alone.

Chances of Success

"We don't consider them as enemies," Interior Minister Tomas Borge says of the Indians. "They were wrong to take up arms, but their reasons and demands were just."

It isn't clear that the new strategy of accommodation and dialogue will work, for many Indian guerrilla leaders still refuse to deal with what they call the "Sandino-Communist atheist devils." But the government's new approach, which began to unfold last spring, is confusing and splintering the rebels. And it is but one example of the Sandinistas' growing willingness to



change directions when practical politics dictate.

Managua, to be sure, continues to crack down on domestic opposition and to cozy up to Havana and Moscow. But over the past year, planners have responded to the country's war-ravaged economy with such un-Marxist moves as shaving public food subsidies, devaluating the currency and imposing a modified austerity program. Although they rail against capitalism, the Sandinistas have encouraged small farmers to sell their produce privately and have ordered higher pay raises for managers than workers.

In the northern mountains, where the Contras once roamed with abandon, the Sandinistas are giving thousands of small plots of land, and guns, to peasants who once flirted with the insurgents. The policy is a move away from socialistic collectivism, but it gives the traditionally conservative people a stake in the Sandinista revolution.

Some old-line revolutionaries don't like what they see. Ariel Bravo Lorio, a member of the Nicaraguan Communist Party's politburo, bitterly complains that the government is "simply diversifying the capitalist system."

But the Sandinistas are trying to win enough popular support at home to defeat the 20,000 or so Contras and convince the U.S. that any future invasion would be widely opposed and costly. And that effort is considered particularly important now, with the Reagan administration pushing for \$100 million in new aid to the insurgents—a request that Congress is expected to vote on in the next few months.

Nowhere does the government seem to feel more urgency than here on the isolated eastern side of the country—home of the 100,000 Miskito, 8,000 Sumo and 1,000 Rama Indians. The Sandinistas have always been more unpopular here than anywhere else in Nicaragua, and the government and even some Indian leaders charge that the Reagan administration plans to revive the Atlantic Coast war front if Congress approves the new aid. That helps to explain why it is here that the Sandinistas lately have shown the most tolerance to political and religious pluralism.

The Indians and English-speaking Creoles who live in the honky-tonk ports, jungles and pine savannas of the coast have long aspired to independence from the countrymen they still refer to as "the Spaniards." Former dictator Anastasio Somoza understood that this region—a former English colony that was united with Nicaragua in the 1890s—had little in common with the Pacific side of the nation, and he generally followed a policy of benign neglect toward it. The people here didn't join the popular insurrection that overthrew Mr. Somoza, and the Sandinistas were irritated by their inaction.

Following the 1979 Sandinista triumph, mutual distrust only grew. Locals resented Cuban doctors and their strange accents. Sandinista army troops showed their disdain for the predominant Moravian religious customs by sleeping in local churches and using pews as firewood. By 1981, many Miskito activists had joined former Somoza followers in Honduras, from where they launched attacks into Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas overreacted and became the enemies of the Miskito people. In late 1981 and early 1982 the government forced thousands of Indians from the Honduran border region, along the Coco River, which is a Miskito holy treasure. In the river village of Leimus, 17 Miskitos were arrested by Sandinista troops and murdered—one of several such episodes of Sandinista abuse.

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Autonomy Project

"We lacked an anthropological vision," says Interior Minister Borge, who took control of Sandinista Atlantic Coast policy last year. "At times we didn't show enough heart, enough love, enough understanding." He claims that is all in the past and says the Sandinistas now are fully committed to an autonomy project that will "respect customs, religion, waters and trees, local elections and a regional legislature." He adds: "I'm very optimistic, but I'm concerned about the complexity of the Atlantic problem."

Part of the complexity, he claims, is the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He says the agency is offering Kisan, the largest Indian guerrilla group, money and supplies to unify it and keep it from talking with the Sandinistas. (In Washington, a CIA spokeswoman declines comment.)

But that isn't the only problem. Wycliff Diego, the leader of Kisan, says he will never negotiate because "Communists only want the poor and Indians to be instruments of their power." He adds, "How can we come to an agreement with people who destroyed 117 of our communities and 86 of our churches and butchered our domestic animals?"

Nevertheless, Mr. Borge held three secret negotiating sessions with a high-level dissident Kisan guerrilla delegation last November and December in Managua to solidify cease-fires effected last May and to formulate an autonomy plan for the guerrillas. "Borge said all is possible," says the Kisan intelligence chief, Reynaldo Reyes, who led the Indian team, "so long as there aren't two presidents of Nicaragua."

Sandinistas' Steps

As a sign of good faith, Mr. Borge promised to remove Sandinista troops from dozens of Miskito villages, rebuild churches the Sandinistas had destroyed, free 110 Indian and Creole political prisoners, and speed up shipments of food and supplies to Coco River villages the Sandinistas burned in the forced relocations of four years ago. (The Sandinistas earlier agreed to allow the Indians to return to the river.)

Mr. Reyes revealed details of the talks during a visit to Sandinista-controlled Puerto Cabezas early this year, a sign of progress in itself. His supporters took the opportunity to visit the port's lively discotheques following rallies in Miskito barrios. The video-projection equipment used at the rallies to show Mr. Reyes's view on Miskito autonomy was donated by Mr. Borge's Interior Ministry.

Relations between Mr. Reyes and the Sandinistas were strained soon afterward, when Nicaraguan Air Force planes bombed a village occupied by Indian fighters not participating in the negotiations. But, significantly, the talks and the cease-fires did not break off.

"Wounds are being healed, but they are so deep it will take a lot of years," says the Rev. Leonard Joseph, a Moravian pastor in the port of Bluefields.

Rama Key Project

The healing process is further along in the south of the coastal region around Bluefields, where streets are fragrant with the smell of bananas frying in coconut oil. The Sandinistas last year helped their popularity there by taking the highly unusual steps of suspending the unpopular draft and making participation in political rallies and Sandinista activities strictly voluntary.

The Sandinistas have targeted for special attention nearby Rama Key, the island home of hundreds of Rama Indians and a traditional center of popular support for Misurasata, another leading Indian guerrilla group. In the last few months, they have undertaken an electrification project, donated a movie projector and screen, and supplied paint to freshen up the island's Moravian church. As a Christmas present, the Sandinistas gave the islanders a television set.

Much of the change in opinion, however, has little to do with the Sandinistas; people have become tired of war and fearful of the Contras. Elba Vanega Ruis, a nearly toothless 47-year-old Rama Indian woman, reaches into her apron pocket for a wrinkled photograph of her younger sister, whom she says the Contras killed last

Dec. 20 in an attack outside Rama Key. "They're bad," she says of the rebels. "The Sandinistas haven't done me any harm."

In the northern village of Sisin, where Miskitos live in clapboard shacks perched on stilts, people complain that Kisan rebels destroyed a vital bridge last October. But that doesn't mean they show any affection for the Sandinistas. During a visit by the region's top Sandinista officials, one Indian after another voices complaints.

"During Somoza's time," an agitated old woman grouches, the people could buy mosquito nets. "Now we can't afford them." She says the people are afraid of the doctors the Sandinistas send. Other villagers complain about the price of clothes.

Jose David Zuniga, the Sandinista party chief along the northern coast, pledges the government will address all their problems. "Our position for 1986," he promises, "is to talk together and to search for peace so we can understand each other as Nicaraguan brothers."